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Who is Facing the Mirror?

Since my early adolescence, when I learned that I was an Arab descendant on the paternal line, I had been trying to understand what that exactly meant, what was the character of the substance that made it different from my Brazilian portion I inherited from my mother. For it was easy to understand a certain singularity in the Arabic style of being because people who learned I was a grandchild of Arabs hoped to see something of that style in me.

I had three mirrors to find that identity: the image the Brazilians made of the Arabs, the image my family made of itself, and the image emerging from books.

In the image of the first mirror and in public opinion, the concepts of Arab and Muslim were easily confused. And besides being Muslims, all Arabs ran small businesses. And they were greedy. And they were not Arabs but Turks. For it was with Ottoman passports that the first Syrian and Lebanese immigrants arrived in Brazil without being particularly desired, unlike European immigrants, whose arrival was financially encouraged by the government.

Well, my family was Christian. Incidentally, all the Arab families I knew were Christian. This meant that I was only half an Arab. And half a Christian, because we were orthodox Christians, not very much accepted nor understood by Catholics.

In addition, the character of a tight-fisted hawker, an exploiter of the poor, someone who charges too much when selling for cash and abuses interest rates when selling by instalments never befitted my personal history. My grandfather was a poet whose house was full of bookshelves standing at every wall. My father, being an erudite man, used to leave the car outside because even the garage was a book storage. My great-grandfather, I was told, had founded a school and was the owner of the largest library in Lebanon.

Thus, I preferred to look for the second alternative, the family mirror. My grandfather especially represented that mirror. He was immensely proud of being an Arab (more than actually being Lebanese).

For two reasons: Arabs, according to him, were a people of fundamental significance in the history of mankind, had dominated all sciences and were directly responsible for the development of Europe.

Being Brazilian (he told me), I could see the signs of Arab civilisation in my own language because the Arabs dominated the Iberian Peninsula for eight centuries and had brought the culture, the beauty and the sciences to that region. When I said *álgebra*, *alquimia*, *açúcar*, *azeite*, *azar*, *mascate*, *almofada*, *arroz* (and *arroz-com-feijão* is a typical Brazilian meal), I was actually speaking Arabic words representing concepts or elements of civilisation brought to the Iberian Peninsula by the Arabs.

Another source of Arab pride, according to my grandfather, was the language: Arabic was the richest and most beautiful in the world. Because each word had a vast number of synonyms. Because it was written with the prettiest script. And because it had a unique poetry, which was inaccessible to me. Nevertheless, instead of teaching me this Arabic, he encouraged me to love Portuguese because I would only be a real Brazilian if I spoke the language of my homeland perfectly, just as he was only an Arab because he loved the language of his ancestors.

Although this enthusiasm fascinated me, I could not accept that image as mine: firstly because I did not speak any Arabic; secondly because that brilliant civilisation to which the Iberian cultures owed so much was the work of Muslims. And it was the Muslims who – as far as I was told – had persecuted the Christians of the east.

Then I heard quite frequently from my father and many uncles (and I have to say that I still hear the same theory today) that Arab Christians, more specifically Lebanese Christians, were not Arabs in the narrow sense of the word. In fact, they were Phoenicians forced to speak the language of the Muslim invaders who subjugated them.

At that time, being a Phoenician was completely unimaginable to me. I could not hear the Phoenician language; I did not eat any Phoenician food; I did not dance any dance nor did I sing any songs that were Phoenician. Even if the Phoenicians had been as glorious as the Arabs (also because they invented the alphabet) their glory was much more distant and diffuse. It was not interesting to be a Phoenician because the Phoenicians had not had anything that was especially theirs and, maybe mostly, because they had been battered, had disappeared.

Thus I grew up with the sensation of having descended from an ethnic group without a face, without its own identity, whose history told me little and which was very distant from me. All that was left to me was my Brazilian side. And the Brazilians did not recognise us Turks, one of the roots forming their identity.

During this process – and I would like to point out that it happened in my adolescence – I also remembered the image of the third mirror, that of books. Apart from the oriental poems and stories I had come across accidentally and which were quite common in Western literature, there were two fundamental texts: *The Arabian Nights* (which today is a part of world literature whose influence on the Western imagery is immeasurable) and *The man who calculates*, a novel by Júlio César de Mello e Souza, who attributed the authorship of his books to a fictitious Arab called Malba Tahan.

Though he was not a descendant of the Syrians or the Lebanese, Malba Tahan, a Brazilian professor of mathematics, wrote a vast work composed mainly of oriental stories, mostly Arabic, and some novels such as *Salim, the magician* and *The man who calculates*, his most famous book.

The man who calculates tells the story of a Persian sage who travels around the world solving strange mathematical problems proposed to him, until he falls in love with a Christian slave and converts to Christianity. Its main difference to *The Arabian Nights* is its lack of erotic and supernatural components. It has, however, a similar structure with a chain of independent stories favouring the exceptional, the uncommon, the odd, the outstanding.

The writings of Malba Tahan address the young public and are founded on fundamental moral values, the quest for knowledge and the practice of generosity in particular. Beremiz Samir, the man who calculates, is intelligent, generous, prudent, forgiving, good. And Beremiz' morale is based on what in the West is usually called Oriental wisdom.

Strange to say that despite his overwhelming success Malba Tahan had no successors. Fiction with Arabic topics remained limited to translations of the *Nights* and to his novels. Even if I could extract an image from these readings that corresponded to that depicted by my father and my grandfather – because the characters of Malba Tahan were wise and decent men who loved knowledge – there would still be

the impression that this universe was not part of me, since it was a basically Muslim universe.

I entered adult life having lost my father and my grandfather. By then, I no longer felt I needed to look for an Arab identity as I considered myself Brazilian. And it was not only because of my mother's descent. It was mainly because I spoke Portuguese, listened to samba, attended Afro-Brazilian cults, ate rice-and-beans, played *capoeira* (a Brazilian kind of martial art), watched football matches and attended the carnival.

And this did not happen only to me. All the Turks and their descendants were completely integrated into Brazilian life. While the few Muslims among them could still be distinguished by practising a different religion, the Christian majority's only distinctive feature was an Arab name, as if it were a label. And the custom of eating *quibe*, *taboule*, *chancliche* and vine leaves. Thus I saw all these names scattered in all segments of Brazilian life: from Zaquia Jorge, the popular actress or Hélio, "the Turk", a samba composer, to people from the upper middle class such as the journalist Ibrahim Sued or the trader Khalil Gebara. And there were many others: in football, in medicine, in films, in politics, in carnival, in industry.

There was one thing that always roused my attention: the large number of Turks among the great masters of the Portuguese language – Said Ali, Evanildo Bechara, Antonio Houaiss. It seemed to me that in a way they had all heeded my grandfather's advice and that the devotion for the Portuguese language represented definitive integration into the new world of the Americas.

In literature, however, there was no such diversity. The stereotype of the tight-fisted and unscrupulous Turk, greedy for profit and gain, dominated. Among all the different stereotypical characters of Arab immigrants that Brazilian fiction has produced, nearly all of them secondary, there is one who sticks out: Nacib, the Syrian from the novel *Gabriela, clove and cinnamon* by Jorge Amado.

In the novel, Nacib is a typical immigrant arriving in Brazil to make his fortune in trade. He establishes a restaurant in Ilhéus, which – in 1925 – lives in the fever of cocoa-exportation. He falls in love with Gabriela, a typical Brazilian girl of mixed blood who works as a cook in his establishment.

Jorge Amado explores the contrast between two innocent natures: that of Nacib, who believes in Gabriela's love and offers to marry her following the traditional moral pattern, and that of the girl, who walks barefoot, plays like a child, is not ashamed of undressing in front of people and accepts the love of men as if she lived in a world unaffected by the anathema of original sin.

When Gabriela starts living with Nacib as his wife, the Syrian gives her jewellery, fine clothes, expensive shoes (which she has difficulty wearing); he takes her to feasts, tries to show her off in the best society of Ilhéus and wants to lift her to a superior category of woman.

Until the day he finds Gabriela in bed with Tonico Bastos, a lawyer, a kind of Brazilian Don Juan. Then Nacib banishes Gabriela – who, innocent and sensual, does not seem to understand the reasons of such turmoil. But Nacib cannot forget her or, better, he cannot give up the erotic pleasure offered by the girl. He takes her back, not as his wife any more, but under the former conditions as his employee. He is happy again because he has got the sexuality of Gabriela for free without worrying about the adultery and because he becomes ever richer (and it is Gabriela who makes the excellent food sold by the Syrian).

Thus Jorge Amado's novel offers a symbol for the Arab immigrant's dilemma: the New World (represented by Gabriela's beauty, eroticism and moral depravity) is a space to be explored (and Nacib ends the book exploring the work and the sexuality of the girl), and never one of affective integration (because Gabriela betrays Nacib).

It was only from the 70s on that Brazilian fiction would produce great works in which the Arab characters moved away from the Turk stereotype. For the first time Arabs spoke about themselves.

In Raduan Nassar's novel *Archaic farming*, André, the son of Arab immigrants living on a farm, leaves home suffocated by the rigid authority of his father and with a strong sense of guilt because of his incestuous relation to his sister Ana. Pedro, the elder brother, sent by his mother, finds André and takes him back. André appears remorseful and their father decides to have a celebration. It is at this occasion that an unexpected tragedy occurs: during Ana's – very sensual – dance (seeming to insinuate herself to André), their father guesses the incest, takes a big knife and stabs his daughter.

Actually, the fact that the plot is set in Brazil is of absolutely secondary significance, if not accidental. The real drama occurs within

the family. It has universal character. The basic contribution of *Lavoura arcaica* is actually its being perhaps the first fictive Brazilian text showing Arab characters with great human density in deep psychological tension.

There is also another striking aspect: Raduan Nassar (a renowned stylist of the Portuguese language) has given the narrative an Arab voice by using metaphors of Oriental flavour and by inserting exemplary tales into the plot; tales that are typical for the sapient literature of the Middle East (like that of the hungry man to whom the sovereign offers empty plates in order to test his patience).

And Milton Hatoum – another renowned stylist of the Portuguese language – who ultimately destroys the stereotype of the Turk. *Tale of a certain Orient* is a novel about a Lebanese descendant who returns to his hometown in Brazil trying to retrieve his own past.

There is no linear plot in the book. The protagonist reconstructs and evokes memories of his past, visits places of his childhood and reunites with people. It is in this process that the Arab immigrant's profound drama emerges between the attempt to maintain his lost identity and the necessity of becoming integrated in a new universe.

The most distinctive character in the book (in my opinion) is that of the narrator's father; a Muslim married to a Christian, who prays locked up in his room, as if his relation to his own identity did not suit the context of Brazilian society.

This is the man who falls in love with a woman upon hearing of her beauty; who finds comfort in reading *The Arabian Nights*; who utters those typical concise Arabic sentences such as "You will find Paradise on earth on the back of a horse, in the pages of some books and between the breasts of a woman".

It is also interesting to mention that the protagonist's family is a typical one: they are traders like the majority of Arab immigrants. The difference is that they now have souls, they are really human, they live a personal tragedy.

After these two texts, the Turk disappeared. There were other novels such as *The brothers*, also by Hatoum (strangely enough, another drama containing certain incestuous tension, as if this symbolised the quest for cohesion in Arab families), *Nur in the dark* by Salim Miguel and even novels by non-descendants like *Amrik* and *Desmundo* (a word that might mean "anti-world") by Ana Miranda or *Thousand*

years minus fifty by Angela Dutra de Menezes – all of them dealing with Arab characters and their children without the limiting stereotype.

When I was around thirty-five, I did not know yet that a certain set of poems would transform my life. After about fifteen years of studying Brazilian history, indigenous languages, African cultures (on which my first two works of fiction are based), a certain impetus made me seek my Arab identity again.

This was when I visited Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. And in a bookshop in al-Hamra street in Beirut, I bought a book called *Literary history of the Arabs*, by Reynold Nicholson. It was in this book that I heard about the *Suspended Odes* for the first time. It had a great impact on me. In fact, it was the biggest literary impact in my life. The few lines translated there, linked to the legends of the poets who created them, opened up a world undreamed of before.

Eroticism, generosity, eloquence, nobleness, dauntlessness, pride, loyalty, abdication, wisdom, the love of pleasure, disregard for riches – all this imbedded in the most beautiful poetic language – made me see in those heroes the model of man into which I projected my identity.

I decided to learn Arabic to be able to read those texts in the original language, at the same time buying all available translations of the *Suspended Odes* in English, French and Spanish, and devouring all the history books dealing with the pre-Islamic period, the Age of Ignorance.

Then I made a fundamental discovery: long before the birth of the Prophet, different Bedouin tribes who created the monuments of pre-Islamic poetry had converted to Christianity. The oldest Arabic inscription was engraved in a Christian church; there were Arabs among the bishops who debated on the famous Byzantine questions, among the first martyrs of Christianity, not to forget the Christians of Najran; even after the Muslim conquest a Bedouin and Christian poet had recited in front of the caliph upholding a crucifix; characters of fundamental significance to the Arab culture had their origin among orthodox Christians, such as Abu Tammam and Ibn al-Rumi; and even John Damascene, the last prominent Father of the Church, was originally called Mansur and was a grandchild of the Bedouin sheikh who negotiated the surrender of Damascus with the Muslims.

To me this represented the end of the Phoenician theory that had irritated me so much. Now I knew that there were Bedouin ancestors among the orthodox Christian Arabs. The common identity of all Arabs was the unity of language, the ethical and aesthetic heritage of pre-Islamic poetry, differences in religion being irrelevant.

Enthusiastic about my new self, I dared something bigger: I started translating the *Suspended Odes*. Simultaneously, I began my third work of fiction, its protagonist being a Bedouin poet in the Age of Ignorance.

But I don't want to talk about my books. It was the experience of translation that was really fundamental. I lived in the Age of Ignorance during five years of recreating pre-Islamic poetry in Portuguese. Each verse, each image assumed new, superior beauty when understood in the original language. And it was only when I had finished translating that I realized what was happening to me there, in that moment, that I had actually become an Arab. It was not a question of religion or ancestry.

I remembered an antique ritual of the Tupi Indians (among which I also have ancestors) in which they adopted a name for each enemy they devoured. As if a new personality emerged from the absorption of another.

I was an Arab because I had learned Arabic and because I had emotionally relived the pre-Islamic poets' course in the desert. It seemed secondary that I had accidentally discovered an obscure history about a Muslim-born great-grandfather of mine, unknown to the family.

This was not important any more. I had become an Arab by adding the Bedouin poetical heritage to my aesthetic sensitivity. I no longer needed mirrors.